



## The Representation of ordinary life in R. K. Narayan's novels

Dr. Kulbhushan Rajak

Asst. Professor, English, Govt. Degree College, Nainpur  
Dist. Mandla (M.P.)

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.13.1.158](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.13.1.158)



### Article info

Article Received: 30/01/2025  
Article Accepted: 16/03/2025  
Published online: 21/03/2025

### Abstract

The stories of R.K. Narayan revolve around the themes of everyday life and ordinary people. His characters are mischievous, innocent, intelligent, resourceful, and corrupt. They challenge normal discipline, and as a result, they are frequently mistreated by seniors. In his novels, every character is a live creation of an artistic presentation. They are not heroes, heroines, royalty, or nobles; instead, they are middle-class members. Their actions are self-evident, but they are puppets in God's hands. They appear to be carrying out their responsibilities as an active agent who is confronted with or exposed to a specific problem in order to find common ground. R.K. Narayan's success is based on the fact that each of his common local characters is unique. Non-heroes become heroes in the end. They express themselves through their ideas, which truly reflect their personalities. Surprisingly, Narayan's characters remain dedicated to life's true meaning.

**Keywords:** Malgudi, buoyant, equanimity, renunciation, harmonious.

### Discussion

R. K. Narayan is one of the most renowned Indian English writers. His style is simple, gentle and humorous. R. K. Narayan is remarkable not only for his outstanding and grand qualities of humour, descriptive beauty and characterization but also for his simple and easy language and unaffected, elegant prose style. In his novels and short stories, Narayan showed a special ability to make the rhythms and intricacies of South Indian life accessible to people of other cultures inside India as well as to the people of other cultures around the world.

Central to this achievement was the creation of *Malgudi*, the fictional South Indian town he peopled with ordinary men and women, made memorable by his writing. R. K. Narayan has chosen characters from a wide variety of circumstances. They are not rich; they are likewise not poor. They originated from the middle-class circumstances. They are additionally clever. They have enough presence of mind; they are sharp spectators of life. They have an abounding feeling of life. They are constantly cheerful participants throughout everyday life. They are altogether conceived hopeful people.

Most of Narayan's stories are set in *Malgudi*, a fictional town that represents a typical Indian small town with its familiar routines and limited horizons. His protagonists are usually ordinary people like shopkeepers, teachers, clerks or young boys, facing relatable problems like family conflicts, romantic entanglements and societal pressure. Narayan meticulously describes the small details of daily life, including food, clothing, conversations and local customs, creating a vivid and authentic picture of Indian life. Even in dealing with serious issues, Narayan often uses humor and irony to highlight the absurdity of everyday situations, giving his stories a light-hearted feel. While focusing on the mundane, Narayan often explores deeper themes like the meaning of life, individual freedom and the human condition through the lens of his ordinary characters. The people of *Malgudi* are the middle-class people of India. They do not take part in politics, nor do they want to become famous stars. His portrayal of human life is correct to realities. He reliably portrays the life of Indian common people as he finds himself among them. As Graham Greene says, "he has offered me a second home. Without him I could never have known what it is like to be Indian"(The Occasional Review).

R. K. Narayan's characters are deep-rooted in their social reality. They strive for some ambition grappling with their fate. Having their own ambitions and hopes they struggle hard to work out their destiny, even going outside the norms of society. In this conflict of society and individual, always at the end the society or community triumphs and makes the individual aware that he is a part and cannot exist in isolation. The hero usually sets out on a quest for something or the other. Sometimes it is money, at other times it is self-identity or love and marriage yet other times it is a meaningful relationship with his family members and many more. That is why Narayan's novels are novels of character, which seem to comment that man in the crowded world is all alone and he is what circumstances make of him. The hero of

Narayan's short stories and novels, the modern unknown warrior, is the middle-class common man. R. K. Narayan is content to snap life's ironies, knots of satiric circumstances and tragic-comedies of mischance and misdirection. "The art of Narayan is resolved limitations and diligent exploration, he is content like Jane Austen with his little bit of ivory, just so many inches wide" (Iyengar, 360). Narayan shows a strong affinity to typically Indian tradition of storytelling. But he adopts his form and style from the West. He steers clear of a message or doctrine to his readers. "He is an analyst of individual feelings, emotions and action in an exploration of hidden human conflicts. Nowhere in his novels does he preach or pontificate" (Varghese, 139).

*Swami and Friends* was Narayan's first novel and it was at once hailed by competent critics as a great work of art. The novel describes the life of boys in South-Indian school. The novel is remarkable for the author's understanding of child psychology and for his depiction of the carefree, buoyant world of school boys in a most realistic and convincing manner. *Swami* is one of the Narayan's immortal creations. *Swami and Friends* introduces us to this ramshackle sort of town called *Malgudi* a south Indian town on the border of the states of Mysore and Madras. It is a region whose particularities were to be gradually unfolded in a series of novels making the region familiar in the mind's eye as *Malgudi* of R. K. Narayan. Narayan is able to transform a particular limited region into a symbol of India and Indian life. *Malgudi* is the only character in his works which changes but the changes that take place in *Malgudi* are the changes that were taking place in the country as a whole during the stirring thirty years 1935-1965. Narayan's treatment is so convincing and vivid that the readers begin to feel that whatever happens in *Malgudi* happens everywhere. He studies life's little ironies in *Malgudi* and there are life's little ironies everywhere. The men or women in the novels of Narayan are of ordinary abilities, they

are not extraordinary persons that seek to realise some or the other ambition, fails or achieves a measure of success in society which is more traditional than modern.

*The Bachelor of Arts* (1937), set in Malgudi, is a story about a young man, Chandran, tracing his college days, a failed love, a flight, a time of self-denial, a revival and return, employment and finally his marriage. This work is just another example of the author's distinctive, subtle humour and his ability to draw his readers into the story, and hold them there from the beginning to the end. Chandran's parents are caste-conscious, superstitious and closely adhere to age old customs and traditions. At the time of a marriage, the proposal must come from the bride's family, the star of the girl, the status of her parents; the agreement of horoscopes and the dowry and gifts which she is likely to bring has to be taken into consent. The girl must be married before she attains puberty. The ego-clash between the boys' people and the girls' people has been excellently depicted by Narayan while describing Chandran's desire to marry the girl, Malathi of his liking.

*The Dark Room* (1938) is an example of the recreation of middle-class milieu with its pain and ecstasy fused into one structure. It is the novel about a family with Ramani, his wife Savitri and three children Babu, Kamala and Sumati. This story is about Savitri who is an obedient housewife living with her husband and three children. Her husband neglects her and bosses over her on everything and most of the time she silently suffers. Sometimes when she is unable to bear it, she goes to "The Dark Room" in the house to mope. When her husband has an affair with a colleague in the office, she fights back, leaves house and tries to kill herself. She is rescued and after some twists and turns she finally returns to the same house. The idea of "The Dark Room" is present in Indian mythology as well where woman of the house will retire to this room when they are sulking or they want to demand something specific from

their husband. In this case, though it does not work well for Savitri. The book is written in very simple style which is typical of Narayan and with lot of details.

*The English Teacher* (1945) is an autobiographical novel. Much of Narayan's personal suffering has gone into the making of this novel. Narayan refines his narrative skills and creates a tragic-comedy which is superior to its precursor in style and technique. *The English Teacher*, characterized by poetic-prose is used to highlight marital love and harmonious marital relationships, both in the temporal and spiritual worlds. It narrates the domestic life of Krishna a lecturer of English in the Albert Mission College, Malgudi.

*Mr. Sampath* (1949) deals with some serious subjects with an overlying story employing with a ridiculous style of comedy. The protagonist of this story is Srinivas. He is a passionate editor of a newspaper that is run by only one person. The name of the newspaper is 'The Banner' and Mr. Sampath is the printer there who shoulders the financial burden of the newspaper. In this schedule he also makes uninvited editorial comments. This relationship appears to work well for Srinivas until the paper closes down and Sampath invites his friend to join him in the world of cinema or movie making. Eventually Sampath falls in love with the heroine of the movie and this step makes his life difficult as well. Srinivas has his problem of over responsibility. Due to some unavoidable circumstances Srinivas leaves the studio and revive 'the banner' with another printer. Sampath was not bothered about it. But at the loss of the lady, money, fame, wealth, and peace he comes back to Srinivas. An integral part of Malgudi's flexible society is Sunrise Pictures and although it allows the townsfolk an opportunity to realize their potentialities, it also affords them the chance, ironically, to display their eccentricities. The film studios function as a magnet for the odd assortment of individuals who are drawn to Malgudi by dreams of grandeur and wealth. Together with the two

male protagonists in the novel they become involved in the filming of 'The Burning of Kama'.

*The Financial Expert* (1952) narrates the story of Margayya, a financier. As his name indicates Margayya shows the way for illiterate, poor peasants to draw loans from the bank and from each other. He conducts his business in front of the Central Cooperative Bank, under the shade of a banyan tree with his 'tin box, a gray, discoloured, knobby affair', in which he carried his entire equipment consisting of an ink bottle, a pen, a blotter, a small red covered register and the most important of all, loan application forms. Despite warnings from the bank's secretary not to indulge in illegal possession of the application forms, Margayya continues with his financing. To him, "money alone is important in this world. Everything else will come to us naturally if we have money in our purse" (21). In his view "If money was absent men came near being beasts" (27).

*Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955) relates the story of two young people of Malgudi, Sriram and Bharati. Sriram was the orphaned young man brought up without a care by his pampering grand-mother, whom he called Granny. On his twentieth birthday his Granny entrusted him a considerable amount which she had kept in her account. The money was the pension from Sriram's father who had been killed in the War. He came into contact with Bharati and fell into love at first sight. He met her as she was making tin collection for the freedom movement. Bharati's father had been shot dead while offering Satyagraha against the British during the first Non-cooperation Movement. She, an infant then, was adopted and brought up by the Sevak Sangh, a Gandhian institute, as a foster daughter to Gandhi. The love of Sriram and Bharati went on in the background of the struggle for independence launched by Mahatma Gandhi. Bharati's first loyalty was to the Mahatma and the marriage between Sriram and Bharati could be possible only when Gandhi gave his blessings.

Meanwhile Sriram, a pleasure seeking man, was totally changed to a freedom fighter and a follower of Gandhi. He was imprisoned for several years as punishment for derailing a train. Finally he is freed from the prison as India won independence. Sriram and Bharati waited for the Mahatma at the Birla Mandir in New Delhi to obtain his final consent for their marriage. Some features of *Malgudi* are seen in this novel as, "Gandhiji's tour was drawing to an end, he was to board a train at Koppal, a tiny station at the foot of the Mempi Hills" (91).

*The Guide* (1958) abounds with postcolonial elements. Raju, the central character, grows up near a railway station and becomes a shopkeeper and then a resourceful tourist guide. He meets Rosie, a beautiful dancer and her husband Marco, a scholar and anthropologist, who is more interested in his research than in his young wife Rosie. Rosie and Marco engage Raju's services as a tourist guide and he takes them sightseeing. Rosie, Velan, Raju's mother and uncle, Gaffur, the driver, Joseph, the steward of the bungalow where Marco stayed, are all characters exhibiting the traditional Indian culture and ethos. Raju and Marco, on the contrary, bear features of Western or Modern culture and manners. Thus the conflict between tradition and modernity is evident in the behaviour and conversation of these characters throughout the novel. *The Guide* not only depicts Indian society, its customs, traditions, culture, ostentations, superstitions and religious faith, but also presents a conflict between the traditional and modern values which are symbolized by Raju's mother and his maternal uncle on the one hand and by Raju and Rosie on the other. In such conflicts old values have to give place to new values and thus Raju's mother leaves her home for Raju and Rosie. R. K. Narayan portrays a South-Indian conservative society in the village, Mangal. Though the contact of Western culture brought many changes in the village, castes and traditional occupations continue to exist. Marriages are still arranged. Astrology is

accepted there. Washing the feet before visiting a temple or a saint as a ritual of purification, pulling the temple chariot along the streets on festive days, smearing holy ash on the forehead, reciting all kinds of sacred verse, consulting an astrologer for auspicious or sacred time, lighting the lamp in the God's niche, reading the *Bhagavad-Gita* are some of the minor rituals appearing in the novel. Touching the feet of the saint, making offerings in kind or prostrating before god, are other ritualistic forms. Raju's fasting to appease the rain gods and bring rain to save the people is the most significant ritual in the novel.

In *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (1961), the Man-Eater is a man, not a tiger, an ego-centered man for whom the objective world is non-existent, a modern Rakshasa, who wants to kill the elephant that belongs to the local temple. The title pronounces the name of the town Malgudi where the main action takes place as in most of the other novels. The man-eater, as R. K. Narayan himself says, is a man; but he does not belong to *Malgudi*. The theme of corruption by the outsiders is effectively developed in this novel, wherein H.Vasu the outsider, disrupts the normal life in *Malgudi* with his boisterousness and destructive genius. He leaves *Malgudi* and this world in the end to enable order and normalcy to prevail in Malgudi. Nataraj symbolizes the peaceful life in Malgudi.

*The Vendor of Sweets* (1967) is a sociological study of the sixties, it highlights the ironies of the life of leaders of free India who swear by the name of Mahatma Gandhi, but actually live a degraded life. Jagan looks a typical travesty of Mahatma Gandhi, clad in Khadi-cloths and with the Geeta in his hands, sells sweets in Malgudi. His son Mali is also mediocre and degenerated. He represents that class of young Indian men who fascinated by American affluence and culture, make airy plans for the improvement of their prospects and sometimes criticises own country. Mali lives an immoral life with Grace, the American-

Korean girl; a tension prevails between the father and son because view-points of both are hard to meet. Through the novel Narayan wants to show the existing attitude towards Gandhism, renunciation, business correspondence and possibility or impossibility of the union of the two culture, i.e. East and West. The east and west encounter is remarkably visible in this novel. The westernized modern India is set against the traditional India.

### Conclusion

R. K. Narayan portrays the social-cultural changes that have been taking place in *Malgudi*. It is true that what is true of *Malgudi* is true of all India. Narayan's realistic description of *Malgudi* produces immense dramatic effects, he is able to join together and analyse the whole pattern of *Malgudi* society. He has a very positive approach about the characters and places which make the scenes of *Malgudi* alive to our perception. *Malgudi* and its significant situations are found supremely fit according to relevance. He rejects sordid and clumsy facts and therefore, the setting of *Malgudi* is found smooth, sleek and polished. He paints the Malgudian characters with relevant romance, fantasy, sentimentality, social conflicts and follies of life. He is a true realist and never attempts to deviate from the traditional form of realism. The *Malgudi* novels are the expression of various problems and predicament of middle class society particularly Narayan's characters symbolize wisdom, courage, loyalty and betrayal and deal with the wound and sadness of the individuals in their private life.

R. K. Narayan's stories begin with realistic settings and everyday happenings in the lives of a cross-section of Indian society with characters of all classes. Gradually fate or chance, oversight or blunder, transforms ordinary events to preposterous happenings. Unexpected disasters befall the hero as easily as unforeseen good fortune. The characters accept their fates with an equanimity that suggests the

faith that things will somehow turn out happily, whatever their own motivations or actions. Progress, in the form of Western-imported goods and attitudes, combined with bureaucratic institutions, meets in *Malgudi* with long-held conventions, beliefs and ways of doing things. The modern world can never win a clear-cut victory because *Malgudi* accepts only what it wants, according to its own private logic.

Williams, Haydn Moore. *Studies in Modern Indian Fiction in English*. Vol. 1, Writers Workshop, 1978.

### References

- Iyengar, K. R. Srinivas. *Indian Writing in English*. Asia Publishing House, 1973.
- Kapadia, Novy. "Middle Class Milieu in R. K. Narayan's Novels." *Commonwealth Fiction*, edited by R. K. Dhawan, Classical Publishing Company, 1988.
- Narayan, R. K. *Swami and Friends*. Indian Thought Publications, 1956.
- . *The Bachelor of Arts*. Indian Thought Publications, 1992.
- . *The Dark Room*. Indian Thought Publications, 1986.
- . *Mr. Sampath*. Indian Thought Publications, 1973.
- . *A Tiger for Malgudi*. Indian Thought Publications, 1991.
- . *Vendor of Sweets*. Indian Thought Publications, 1980.
- . *The English Teacher*. Indian Thought Publications, 1992.
- . *Waiting for the Mahatma*. Indian Thought Publications, 1967.
- . *The Financial Expert*. Indian Thought Publications, 1972.
- Verghese, C. P. *Problems of the Indian Creative Writer in English*. Somaiya Publishers, 1971.
- Walsh, William. "Sweet Mangoes and Malt Vinegar: The Novels of R.K. Narayan." *Indo-English Literature*, edited by K. K. Sharma, Vimal, 1977.